The Puerto Rican Harlequin Butterfly
4:50 minutes

USFWS presents… **The Puerto Rican Harlequin Butterfly**

Of all insects, no other evokes more admiration than butterflies. Their beauty and the mystery of their transformation have always inspired us.

The legend has it that when you want your dreams to come true, you should whisper your request to a butterfly and it will take your wish to the sky and make it come true.

In Puerto Rico and adjacent islands there are about 102 species of butterflies. The Puerto Rican harlequin butterfly known scientifically as *Atlantea tulita,* is endemic to Puerto Rico. "The genus *Atlantea* is unique to the Greater Antilles and each island has its own endemic species," Antonio R Pérez Asso et. al, Butterflies of Puerto Rico, 2009, pg. 94.

The top view of the Puerto Rican harlequin butterflies is mostly orange with black spots. It's very similar to the monarch and they both belong to the Ninfalids family.

The hindwing has an intricate pattern of spots arranged in rows of white, orange, black and red. The pattern is somewhat similar to the diamond design used to make the costumes worn by jesters and harlequins for Italian comedies over 400 years ago.

Currently, this butterfly is found naturally on the Northwest coast of Puerto Rico and has been studied or sighted within Puerto Hermina in Quebradilla, and the Guajataca Tunnel in Isabela. The Puerto Rican harlequin used to be more abundant and was reported in Maricao, but there are no recent reports of the specie in this town.

Some call this butterfly the "Quebradillana." The entrance to the town of Quebradillas is decorated with a tile mural which includes the Puerto Rican harlequin butterfly along with other distinctive features of the town's heritage.

The Merendero Recreational Park in Quebradillas has frequent sightings of the harlequin butterfly. This park, west of the Rio Guajataca estuary, faces the Atlantic Ocean where the harlequin butterfly finds refuge against all elements of nature.

The harlequin lays its eggs on a single plant known as *Oplonia espinosa*. This prickly bush grows like a vine with purple flowers. The harlequin deposits its eggs underneath the branches of this plant which provides in return shelter and food. When the egg transform into a caterpillar, it will depend on *Oplonia* as its only source of nutrition.

As the caterpillar grows and matures, it develops into a cocoon. This transformation takes place from the inside out, a bit of dying to be renewed as a new creature, breaking free from bondage and able to fly.

As an adult, the harlequin reproduces and returns to its faithful host, *Oplonia espinosa*. This is how we come to a full circle, the life cycle of our harlequin butterfly.

Habitat destruction and elimination of the host plant *Oplonia espinosa* affect all the life stages of the Puerto Rican harlequin butterfly.

Plant and conserve the prickly bush *Oplonia espinosa*. The future of the Puerto Rican harlequin depends on it.

To attract this butterfly, along with other types, we encourage you to include plants with colorful flowers. Trees like the "guayacán" and "palo de vaca" are good for this. You can also use shrubs like lantana and sea grapes. Butterflies are attracted to the nectar these flowering plants produce.

Let's work together to protect coastal forests and all the creatures that depend on it.

The government of Puerto Rico declared the Puerto Rican harlequin butterfly a critically endangered species. The Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources are currently working on a designation of critical habitat under local jurisdiction.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is evaluating the status of the Puerto Rican harlequin butterfly to determine if the species needs to be protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This announcement is the beginning of a long journey.

On February 25, 2009, Javier Biaggi Caballero, petitioned the Service to list At*lantea tulita* and designate critical habitat for the species. This is the first time the Service is considering to protect a Caribbean endemic insect under the ESA.

This announcement is the first step in a long process that requires a thorough evaluation of the risks to the species and its habitat with the information that is available today. We need information about the species distribution, physical and biological elements that are essential for the species conservation.

Credits

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